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THE DAY THE FLOWERS STOPPED SMELLING BEAUTIFUL

Taylor Parks

Inside a small trapped car that smelled like musk and self-pity sat the boy that would soon tear my soul into a million pieces, throwing it out of his window while driving away despite the no littering signs. He was driving to our usual spot, a field that was near one of the more popular roads in my town. Instead of going straight into the bright lights that led to the field, he turned down a dark abyss and gave me a forgiving look with his ocean blue eyes and fiery

Layout by Tyler Howcott. Photograph by Ariana Robab Rahaei.

red hair. I knew he enjoyed driving, so I just figured we were taking the long way. As the heat radiated around my toes in my bright pink Crocs and my fuzzy pajamas wrapped around me like a constant warm, reassuring hug, I felt safe. I knew, no matter what, he would protect me. I trusted him.

I blinked my eyes, and we were pulled over; a dirt road was all that laid before us. Before I could even process what was happening, his words turned into hands, and my words turned into silence. His eyes were locked on mine as they began to swell up to the brink of tears. I had nowhere to run, nowhere to hide; all I had was him and all he had was me, but he was the last thing I wanted.

Instead of the comforting arms I expected wrapped around me, his hands reached for my neck as he pushed me down. Heavier than a river after a flash flood warning, a rush of tears fell from my eyes. Everything in me became dry like every drop of water had escaped through my eyes, yet all the parts of me that wanted to escape were still there. He hadn't realized this though; he was too busy furthering the deterioration of my body.

The only words I could muster up were "no," but he didn't seem to care what I said. As if every fabric of his being was built on making me trust him only to have him reach into me and steal all the trust I ever had, for anyone, out of my body.

As I stepped out of the car, "it was okay for your first time" echoed through my head. I could replay his voice saying those words to this day. He zoomed away before I could shut the door fully, never looking back.

As I laid in my bed, I realized it didn't feel like my bed; I didn't feel like myself. I couldn't stop repeating his words as he carved me out

like a cantaloupe: "I've been waiting for this." We had been friends for years. *How long had our friendship been on the backburner? How long had objectifying me been his main priority?*

It was as if I had just been baptized with filth. He covered me in a layer that I would never be able to wash away.

My computer screen lit up my face as 2 a.m. rolled around, and I was staring at an empty Google search bar. I couldn't piece together what had just happened to me. I didn't even know where to start, but I figured it wasn't good. I knew that what happened was wrong, but I wasn't sure if I could tell anyone, and I didn't want to hurt my best friend. It took months and months of self-discovery and reflection to realize that this was not what love, friendship, or respect was.

"Every ninety-eight seconds an American is sexually assaulted" ("About Sexual Assault"). At the time I hadn't known what exactly had happened to me and if it would be considered sexual assault, so I just kept it to myself, as many women do. "Seven out of ten rapes are committed by someone known to the victim" ("Perpetrators"). Because of this, many assaults go unreported. Despite this, "Only six out of every 1,000 rapists end up in prison" ("About Sexual Assault"). Given these disappointing statistics, who would want to report their sexual assault? Too often, the cons outweigh the pros, which is very sad.

While consent is a major topic discussed throughout college, my high school had taught me nothing about such things. Sexual education was taught at the bare minimum, which meant that there was little to no discussion of consent, sexual abuse, or assault. While not everything can be taught in the classroom, basic human rights need to be.

I had never thought of myself as the perfect victim—until I remained silent, telling no one. I now realize that by not reporting my assault, I was just reassuring my assaulter that it was completely fine. He had gotten away with it. Too many men get away with sexual assault without any penalty. Reporting means more than trying to get someone in trouble. It is unraveling the chains that were tied around your mouth and yelling out that you're a person too.

A Collection of Freedom

as I push you to the back of my mind
I hear your footsteps
creeping back to my thoughts
so loud they keep me up at night
—*remnants of you*

twelve months later
I unraveled the chains you tied around my mouth

my body is not your throne
I am not the crown atop your head
I am my own goddamn kingdom
don't make me send out my knights in shining armor
they're a lot stronger since you've last seen them
they will not let you into my castle anymore
I have built moats and walls
added crocodiles
you are not welcome anymore

I felt filthy
no matter how many times I showered or bathed
you left a layer on me I would never be able to wash away

right when I thought everything was ending
it began

Works Cited

"About Sexual Assault." RAINN. <https://www.rainn.org/about-sexual-assault>.

"Perpetrators of Sexual Violence: Statistics." RAINN. <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/perpetrators-sexual-violence>.